

Honor Your Parents:

The Fulcrum of the Ten Commandments

There is little doubt that *kibbud av va-eim* is a central mitzvah; it is not merely “another commandment,” but an imperative vital to the enterprise of Torah and mitzvot. The Rambam (*Mamrim* 6:1) characterizes it as a “*mitzvat aseh gedolah*” — a great positive commandment; the Yerushalmi (*Pe’ah* 1:1) declares it “*chamurah shebichamuros*,” — of the most serious mitzvos, and the *Tur* (*Yoreh Deah* 240) prefaces his discussion noting that *kibbud av va-eim* demands a unique “punctilious observance.”

What is the evidence for this evaluation? First, *kibbud av va-eim* appears in the most critical contexts of the Torah. It is delineated in the *Aseret Hadibrot* (*Shemot* 20:12) — *kabed et avikha ve-et imekha*, honor your father and your mother — and not just as any *dibrah* (commandment), but the pivotal one that transitions the *dibrot* from *bein adam la-Makom* (between man and God) to *bein adam la-chaveiro* (between man and man).¹ *Kibbud av va-eim* later resurfaces in *Kedoshim* (*Vayikra* 19:3) “*ish imo ve-aviv ti’rau*,” one shall fear his mother and father — the *parshah* that Ramban (*Vayikra* 19:2) characterizes as *gufei Torah* (foundations of the Torah). In both of these contexts, *kibbud av va-eim* is significantly conjoined with the mitzvah of Shabbat.

Second, according to Rashi (*Devarim* 5:16 s.v. *Ka-asher*), *kibbud av va-eim*



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belongs to a select class of mitzvot issued as a prequel to *matan Torah*.² At Marah, Bnei Yisrael were charged with a few essential commandments that would both prepare them for and afford them a glimpse of the Torah they would later receive--*sham sam lo chok u-mishpat ve-sham ni’sahu* —there He established law and statute and there He tested it (*Shemot* 15:25). Along with Shabbat, monetary laws and *parah adumah*, *kibbud av va-eim* preceded *matan Torah*.

Third, *kibbud av va-eim* is one of the rare instances where the imperative to perform a mitzvah is buttressed by the explication of its own reward: *lema’an ya’arikhun yamekha*, in order that your days be lengthened. The Gemara accordingly (*Chullin* 110b) rules that such mitzvot lie beyond the jurisdiction of Bet Din: *kol mitzvat aseh shematan secharan betzeidah, ein beit din shel matah muzharin alehah* — any mitzvah whose reward is written in the Torah, Bet Din cannot enforce. Given the prominence accorded to *kibbud av va-eim* in the Torah’s presentation, there seems to be little

doubt of its axiological import.

Yet when we assess *kibbud av va-eim* in the *sugya* (Talmudic discussion) of *aseh docheh lo ta’aseh* (the ability of a positive commandment to override a negative commandment) — the *sugya* prima facie most informative of halakhic hierarchies — it emerges as decidedly inferior to other mitzvot, less capable of prevailing over a competing *lav* (negative commandment). At one stage of the discussion in *Yevamot* (6a), the Gemara maintains that any *aseh* (positive commandment) would prevail over a *lo ta’aseh she-yeish bo kareit* (negative commandment with a penalty of Heavenly excommunication), except for the *aseh* of *kibbud av va-eim*. This, the Gemara explains, is due to an imposed constraint:

איש אמו ואביו תיראו [אני ה'] כולכם חייבים בכבודי.

“You shall fear your mother and your father [I am God]” All of you are obligated to honor Me.

By fiat, *kibbud av va-eim* is rendered impotent in a clash against another mitzvah. *Kibbud av va-eim* can never compete against *kavod Shamayim*, the honor of Heaven.

The inferiority of *kibbud av va-eim*, in fact, runs deeper. The same Gemara in *Yevamot* rules that *kibbud av va-eim* is an exception to the otherwise universal principle of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*, incapable of displacing even an ordinary *lav*. The Gemara cryptically cites *kibbud av va-eim*'s rank as a mere *hekhsher mitzvah*, a preparatory, instrumental mitzvah, to explain its conspicuous impotence.³ But this explanation requires clarification: In what sense is *kibbud av va-eim* only a *hekhsher mitzvah*; in what sense is it only a vehicle to achieve something else?

Further still, the Rambam in *Hilkhot Mamrim* (6:12) remarkably rules that the *mitzvat aseh* of *kibbud av va-eim* is incapable of overriding a fellow *mitzvat aseh* and, more strikingly, even a *mitzvat aseh mi-derabanan* (rabbinic mitzvah). This despite the Rambam's ruling elsewhere (*Yibum* 6: 10) that one *aseh* may displace another.⁴ The Rambam's ruling is particularly perplexing because the Gemara's ruling deals specifically with the case of *kibbud av va-eim* against a *lo ta'aseh*. On what grounds does the Rambam extend the Gemara's ruling to a *mitzvat aseh* — and especially to an *aseh mi-derabanan*?

What underlies the Rambam's ruling? How can the *aseh de'oraita* of *kibbud av va-eim* be powerless against an *aseh derabanan*? The *Kesef Mishneh* (*Mamrim* 6:12, s.v. *Afilu*), vexed by this very difficulty, suggests that this ruling is grounded in *lo tasur*. Every *mitzvah derabanan* is thereby elevated to *de'oraita* standing, and

consequently, what appeared to be a clash between a *de'oraita* and *derabanan* is in fact a clash between two *mitzvot de'oraita*:

נראה שהטעם משום דכיון דקי"ל דכל מילי דרבנן אסמכינהו אלאו דלא תסור הרי הוא ככל דברי תורה.

It seems that the reason is that it is established that all rabbinic laws are based on the prohibition of "do not stray" [from their words], it is treated as a biblical commandment.

But this proposed solution of the *Kesef Mishnah* does not sufficiently account for the Rambam's position. It may explain the *derabanan* dimension, but it begs the question as to why the *aseh de'oraita* of *kibbud av va-eim* should cede to a fellow *aseh*. Second, it is not at all apparent that the Rambam ascribes to the view that *lo tasur* transfigures *mitzvot derabanan* into *mitzvot de'oraita*.⁵ To be sure, the *Kesef Mishnah* had his own reservations, and in his *Beit Yosef*, he puts forth an alternative solution:

דכיון דמאני ה' כולכם חייבים בכבודי ילפינן לה, ומילי דרבנן ודאי הם כבודו של מקום אין לו לעבור עליהם בשביל כבוד אביו.

Since we derive it from "I am God, all of you are obligated to honor Me," and observing rabbinic decrees are certainly part of honoring God, one may not violate them to honor a parent.

A special fiat "*Ani Hashem*" declares *kibbud av va-eim* powerless against *kavod Shamayim*, regardless of how trivially the latter manifests. Accordingly, *kibbud av va-eim* cannot displace even an *aseh derabanan*, for it too instantiates *kavod ha-Makom*.

The *Beit Yosef*'s solution to the Rambam's ruling only deepens the conceptual difficulty: Why is *kibbud av va-eim* the only mitzvah enervated

against an *aseh derabanan*; why is *kibbud av va-eim* the only mitzvah hyper-sensitive to *kavod Shamayim*? Moreover, for the *Beit Yosef*, the impotence of *kibbud av va-eim* is stipulated by a *gezeirat ha-katuv* (textual decree) — "*Ani Hashem*" — counterintuitive as it may be. *Tosafot* (*Yevamot* 5b s.v. *Kulkhem*), however, suggest that this fiat is superfluous, for the impotence of *kibbud av va-eim* could be derived even in its absence. After all, the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 31a) rules that honoring one's father prevails when it conflicts with honoring one's mother because "*atah ve-imkha chayavin bikhvod avikha*" — you and your mother are obligated to honor your father. So too, argue *Tosafot*, since child and parent alike are charged with *kavod Shamayim* — "*hu ve-aviv muzharin*" — it intuitively follows that *kibbud av va-eim* cannot override another mitzvah. On *Tosafot*'s view, then, the impotence of *kibbud av va-eim* is not only a fact, it is an intuitive fact.

Have we arrived at a contradiction? We opened our analysis with a survey of *mekorot* that speak to *kibbud av va-eim*'s axiological import, "*chamurah shebichamurot*" in the language of the Yerushalmi. Yet in the *sugya* of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*, *kibbud av va-eim* seems conspicuously subordinate to other *mitzvot*. How does *kibbud av va-eim*'s subordinate status cohere with its axiological prominence?

Further, this is not just an inconsistency between the rules of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh* of *kibbud av va-eim* and its other associated *halakhot*, for the contradiction penetrates internally, within the laws of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*. The hitherto discussed *sugya* in *Yevamot* (6a) points to *kibbud av va-eim*'s exceptional

impotence; but there are other *sugyot* that suggest that, to the contrary, *kibbud av va-eim* is exceptionally potent, more capable of prevailing in conflict than any other mitzvah.

Typically, halakhah maintains that an *aseh* cannot displace a *lav* that is conjoined with an *aseh*, *ein aseh docheh lo ta'aseh va-aseh*. The Gemara in *Bava Metzia* (32a), however, suggests the possibility of *kibbud av va-eim* constituting an exception to this rule; only *kibbud av va-eim* would be sufficiently potent to displace a *lo ta'aseh va-aseh*. The rationale adduced is particularly striking:

הואיל והוקש כיבוד אב ואם לכבודו של מקום שנאמר כאן כבוד את אביך ואת אמך ונאמר להלן כבוד את ה' מהנך.

Since honoring one's father and mother is connected to honoring God as it states here "honor your father and your mother," and it states later "Honor God with your possessions."

The suggested potency of *kibbud av va-eim*, within the laws of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*, is underwritten⁶ precisely by its axiological moment, for *kibbud av va-eim* is matched with *kavod Shamayim*.

Kibbud av va-eim, then, is governed by a fundamental tension. On the one hand, the Gemara in *Yevamot* (6a) maintains that it is manifestly subordinate to other mitzvot because it cannot compete against *kavod Shamayim* — *kulkhem chayavim bikhvodi*. But, on the other hand, the Gemara in *Bava Metzia* (32a) suggests that *kibbud av va-eim* is superior to other mitzvot because it emulates *kavod Hamakom* — *hukash kevodam le-kavod ha-makom*.

Perturbed by this tension, Tosafot (*Yevamot* 6a, s.v. *Ta'ama*) ask how the Gemara could oscillate between such contradictory extremes. How could the *sugya* in *Yevamot* hold that *kibbud av va-eim* is incapable of displacing even a regular *lav*, while the *sugya* in *Bava Metzia* had no qualms suggesting that *kibbud av va-eim* would displace even a *lo ta'aseh va'aseh*? Curiously, the Gemara never entertained the possibility of *kibbud av va-eim* being just like other mitzvot.

Tosafot suggest that *kibbud av va-eim* is by its fundamental character an extreme mitzvah, either subordinate or superior to other mitzvot, but never typical or equal. It is either "*hukash le-kavod ha-makom*" and superior or "*Ani Hashem, kulkhem chayavim bikhvodi*" and subordinate, but never in between. True, the *sugya* entertained the *hava amina* (initial thought), based on *hukash kevodam*



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le-kavod ha-makom, that *kibbud av va-eim* should displace even a *lav va-aseh*, but once the Gemara concluded that it cannot, *kibbud av va-eim* must be demoted to a rank below other mitzvot, incapable of displacing even an ordinary *lav*. But this solution of Tosafot only deflects the difficulty, since the fundamental problem remains: What is the character of *kibbud av va-eim* such that it tends only to the extremes?

Let us pose one further question. The Gemara invoked “*Ani Hashem, kulkhem chayavim bikhvodi*” as the source for *kibbud av va-eim*’s ineffectiveness against clashing mitzvot, implying that when *kibbud av va-eim* conflicts with some mitzvah, it *eo ipso* conflicts with *kavod Shamayim*. Tosafot (Yevamot 5b, s.v. *Kulkhem*) note that this is hardly obvious.

Bet Din ha-Gadol governs the entirety of Klal Yisrael, local *batei din* preside over each community, and parents preside over their atomic mini-communities—the family; *kibbud av va-eim* is the bedrock in which the system of *Torah sheba’al peh* is anchored.

Kibbud av va-eim is itself a mitzvah, and it is not at all apparent that it stands in greater conflict with *kavod Shamayim* than, say, any conflict between two mitzvot. Tosafot tersely suggest that the *gezeirat hakatuv* “*Ani Hashem, kulkhem chayavim bikhvodi*” indicates a special relationship between *kibbud av va-eim* and *kavod Shamayim*, but they don’t elaborate further.

To expound on Tosafot’s suggestion, let us probe the character of *kibbud av va-eim* and extract its central, underlying principles. On one plane, there is undoubtedly a dimension of *hakarat hatov*, gratitude, as the *Sefer ha-Chinukh* articulates in his treatment of the mitzvah (mitzvah no. 33):

משרשי מצוה זו, שראוי לו לאדם שיכיר ויגמול חסד למי שעשה עמו טובה ... ושיתן אל לבו כי האב והאם הם סיבת היותו בעולם, ועל כן באמת ראוי לו לעשות להם כל כבוד וכל תועלת שיוכל, כי הם הביאוהו לעולם, גם יגעו בו כמה יגיעות בקטנותו.

The root of this commandment [to honor one’s parents is] that it is proper for a person to recognize and provide kindness for someone who has provided good to you ... One should internalize the fact that a father and mother are the basis of a person’s existence in this world. For this reason, it is proper to give them all of the honor and service possible because they brought their child into this world and they toiled for him many times while growing up.

But there appears to be an additional dimension to the mitzvah, as well. R. Yosef Albo (*Sefer ha-Ikarim* 3:26) argues that *kibbud av va-eim* is underwritten by the concept of religious authority, the parents’ role in bequeathing their *mesorah* to their children; if this religious authority is to be more than a chimera, it must be

fortified by a concomitant imperative of reverence and honor. *Kibbud av va-eim* is, in this sense, the most elementary *sine qua non* for a religious community:

”כבד את אביך ואת אמך, להזהיר על הקבלה רוצה לומר שימשך האדם לקבלת האבות שזה עיקר כולל לכל הדתות שלא יצויר מציאותם אם לא יהיה האדם נשמע לקבלת האבות וחכמי הדת...אם מן האבות ’כבד את אביך ואת אמך’, ואם מן החכמים ’לא תסור מן הדבר אשר יגידו לך ימין ושמאל’.”

Honor your father and your mother commands the concept of tradition, that one should continue the tradition of one’s parents because this is a foundation that relates to our belief system, for it cannot exist without listening to the tradition of one’s forefathers and the scholars of the religion ... From our forefathers, “Honor your father and your mother,” and from the Torah scholars “Do not stray from the words that they tell you, right or left.”

It is most revealing that R. Yosef Albo classifies *kibbud av va-eim* alongside *lo tasur*, the imperative to obey the rulings of *Bet Din ha-Gadol*, since both mitzvot are rooted deep in the soil of religious authority. *Bet Din*’s authority over and attendant responsibility towards the community is mirrored by *kibbud av va-eim*, on the scale of the individual family.⁷

Indeed, R. Yosef Albo’s interpretation was most likely inspired by the Rambam’s codification. Rather than filing the laws of *kibbud av va-eim* in *Sefer Mada*, where we might have anticipated,⁸ the Rambam codifies them in *Hilkhot Mamrim*, alongside the laws of *Bet Din ha-Gadol*. The first four chapters of *Hilkhot Mamrim* pertain to the laws of compliance and obedience to *Bet Din ha-Gadol*; *lo tasur*; *bal tosif* (don’t add to the commandments); *bal tigra* (don’t subtract from the commandments);

and *zakein mamrei* (rebellious scholar). Chapters five and six tackle *kibbud av va-eim*. The final chapter covers *ben soreir u-moreh* (rebellious child). The unifying theme of *Hilkhos Mamrim* is the authority of Torah *sheba'al peh* (the Oral tradition) and the hierarchy of institutions that preside over it. *Bet Din ha-Gadol* governs the entirety of Klal Yisrael, local *batei din* preside over each community, and parents preside over their atomic mini-communities — the family; *kibbud av va-eim* is the bedrock in which the system of Torah *sheba'al peh* is anchored.

A child's first interaction with the Ribono Shel Olam is through his parents, through the values and beliefs and through the traditions they bequeath to him. It is perhaps with this in view that our above Tosafot saw *kibbud av va-eim* and *kavod Shamayim* as uniquely related, for it is in the furthering of *kavod Shamayim* that the authority of a parent — and thereby the imperative of *kibbud* — is firmly rooted.

Several further indications bolster this interpretation that *kavod Shamayim* underpins *kibbud av va-eim*. First, the Gemara draws several salient analogies between the two. In *Kiddushin* (30b) the Gemara equates *kibbud av va-eim* with *kavod ha-Makom*:

ת"ר נאמר: כבוד את אביך ואת אמך, ונאמר: כבוד את ה' מהונוך, השוה הכתוב כבוד אב ואם לכבוד המקום; נאמר: איש אמו ואביו תירא, ונאמר: את ה' אלהיך תירא ואותו תעבוד, השוה הכתוב מוראת אב ואם למוראת המקום; נאמר: מקלל אביו ואמו מות יומת, ונאמר: איש איש כי יקלל אלהיו ונשא חטאו, השוה הכתוב ברכת אב ואם לברכת המקום... וכן בדין, ששלשתן שותפין בו.

Our rabbis taught: It says "Honor your father and your mother," and it says "Honor God with your possessions," the verse equates honoring one's parents to honoring God. It states "One shall fear his mother and father," and it states "One shall fear God, the Lord and worship Him," The verse equates fear of one's parents to fear of God. It states "One who curses one's father or mother shall be killed," and it states "A person who curses God shall bear iniquity," the verse equates cursing a parent to cursing God ... The equations are logical because the three (God, father and mother) are partners in his being.

In particular, the Gemara suggests that *kibbud av va-eim* is actually a form of *kavod Shamayim*:

בזמן שאדם מכבד את אביו ואת אמו, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעלה אני עליהם כאילו דרתי ביניהם וכבדוני.
When a person honors his parents, God says: I consider it as if I live among you and you honored Me.

And conversely for a child who distresses his parents:



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תני תנא קמיה דרב נחמן: בזמן שאדם מצער את אביו ואת אמו, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: יפה עשיתי שלא דרתי ביניהם, שאלמלי דרתי ביניהם ציערוני.

A beraita was taught before Rav Nachman: When a person causes distress to a parent, God says: It is a good thing that I didn't live among them because if I did, they would cause Me distress.

Similarly, Rav Yosef would compare *kibbud av va-eim* with *kavod ha-Shekhinah*:

רב יוסף כי הוה שמע קל כרעא דאמיה, אמר: איקום מקמי שכינה דאתיא.
*When Rav Yosef would hear the footsteps of his mother, he would say: I should rise for the Shekhinah is coming.*⁹

Second, the *Tur* (Yoreh Deah 240:19) rules that *kibbud av va-eim* presupposes virtuous, upstanding parents. Parents who fail to uphold the values of the Torah forfeit their right to *kibbud*. If *kibbud av va-eim* was grounded solely in *hakarat hatov* — a natural debt of gratitude — it is difficult to see how the rectitude of the parent becomes a necessary condition for *kibbud*. If, however, *kibbud av va-eim* is grounded in a parent's charge to further *kavod Shamayim*, then it follows that a parent who rebuts the very basis of his authority *ipso facto* renounces his claim to *kibbud*; such a parent has uprooted the very ground on which he stands.¹⁰

Third, some Rishonim classify *kibbud av va-eim* as a *mitzvah bein adam la-Makom*. The Ramban (Shemot 20:13), for instance, explicitly identifies the first five *dibrot* — *kibbud av va-eim* among them — as *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom*:

והנראה במכתב הלוחות שהיו החמש ראשונות בלוח אחד שהם כבוד הבורא.
It seems that the writing of the tablets

was such that the first five were written on one tablet because they relate to the honor of the Creator.

A similar point is made by Chizkuni (Shemot 20:12)

חמש דברות הראשונות העובר עליהם אינו רע אלא לשמים לפיכך הזכיר שמו בכולם שהרי לשמו הם קבועים אבל חמש האחרונות אינם אלא לבריות לפיכך לא חש להזכיר שמו בהם.
*If one violates the first five commandments, he is only immoral towards God. Therefore, His name is mentioned in all of them, because they are there to serve Him. The last five are towards other people and therefore, God did not include His name.*¹¹

This classification would be virtually incomprehensible on the view that *kibbud av va-eim* is grounded in *hakarat hatov*. Additionally, in light of R. Yosef Albo's interpretation, we might further appreciate just how felicitously *kibbud av va-eim* — as a manifestation of *kavod Shamayim* — transitions the *dibrot* from *bein adam la-Makom* to *bein adam la-chaveiro*, the fulcrum on which they turn.

Let us now return to our initial query. We observed that a fundamental tension runs throughout *kibbud av va-eim* — a tension which speaks to its dialectical nature. *Kibbud av va-eim* is indisputably a linchpin of the Torah's axiology and possibly, in the *hava amina*, more potent than other mitzvot in displacing a *lav va'aseh*, matched with *kavod ha-Makom*. At the same time, it is pitifully powerless to displace an ordinary *lav*, an exception to the principle of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*, and according to the Rambam, incapable of prevailing over even an *aseh derabanan*, incapacitated by *kulkhem chayavim bikhvodi*. Tosafot, we saw, maintains that *kibbud av va-eim* is necessarily a mitzvah of extremes, never coequal with its

fellow mitzvot. What accounts for this dialectic?

Perhaps the answer lies in the character of *kibbud av va-eim* as a dimension of *kavod Shamayim*, anchored in the federation of religious authority. If parents embrace their role as torchbearers of *mesorah*, their authority issues forth from the hallowed recesses of *kavod Shamayim*. In consonance with it, *kibbud av va-eim* is vital, axiologically central, and exceedingly potent: *hushvu kevodam le-kavod ha-Makom*.

But on these same grounds, if a parent competes against *kavod Shamayim*, when he tests his authority against His Authority, he severs his own authority from its life source and is left pathetically paralyzed and pitifully feeble: *Ani Hashem, kulkhem chayavim bikhvodi*. Thus, a parent's demand that his child violate a *lav* or even an *aseh* or even an *aseh mi-derabanan* is halakhically meaningless.

It is precisely this character of *kibbud av va-eim*, as rooted in *kavod Shamayim*, that explains the dialectic embedded at its core. When *kibbud av va-eim* coheres with *kavod Shamayim*, then *hushvu kevodam le-kavod ha-Makom*; but when *kibbud av va-eim* stands in contradiction with it, then *Ani Hashem, kulchem chayavim bikhvodi*. *Kibbud av va-eim* by necessity, then, is a mitzvah of either extreme, never coequal with other mitzvot — exactly as Tosafot noted.

It will be recalled that the Gemara, in justifying *kibbud av va-eim*'s impotence, why it stands as an exception to *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*, characterized *kibbud av va-eim* as a "*hekhsher mitzvah*," a mitzvah whose import is essentially instrumental or preparatory, whose significance rests in its capacity to facilitate something

external to itself. Perplexed by this characterization, Tosafot (Yevamot 6a, s.v. Shekein) argue that the Gemara did not intend to demote *kibbud av va-eim* to a mere *hekhsher mitzvah* but to describe the typical scenario in which *kibbud av va-eim* conflicts with a *lav*. Strictly speaking, it is the preparation for *kibbud av va-eim* that conflicts with the *lav*, not the mitzvah itself. Suppose a father demands that his son cook for him on Shabbos. The cooking — the action that conflicts with Shabbos — is merely the preparation for *kibbud*, for *kibbud* inheres only in the act of serving (*ma'akhilo*), which occurs later. *Hekhsher mitzvah* then does not characterize *kibbud av va-eim* but the preparatory stages that lead up to it, and it is these stages that are powerless against a *lav*.

This interpretation of Tosafot, however, is highly problematic. For as Tosafot themselves observe, *kibbud av va-eim* is debilitated even when the act of *kibbud* proper clashes against a *lav*, not just its preparatory stages. Ultimately, Tosafot appeal to an inelegant *lo plug*: Since *hekhsherim* are inadequate to displace a *lav*, and since most clashes of *kibbud av va-eim* involve only its *hekhsherim*, we simply generalize to all cases of *kibbud* — acts of *kibbud av va-eim* proper included — and declare them likewise powerless:

ואר"י דכבוד אב אפי' עוסק בגוף מצוה לא דחי דבכל ענין קא פסיק שלא ישמע לו והיינו משום דברוב ענייני כיבוד רגילים להיות על ידי הכשר מצוה קאמר רחמנא דלא דחי בכל ענין.

Rabbeinu Yitzchak asserts that even if one is involved in the actual mitzvah of honoring a parent, it does not override a negative commandment because the Talmud states that one should not listen to the parent under any circumstances. This is because most situations of honoring are preparatory in nature and therefore, the Torah states that it can never override.

But perhaps the Gemara has something else in mind. For in light of our analysis, *hekhsher mitzvah* encapsulates the fundamental character of *kibbud av va-eim* as a parent's partnership with the Ribono Shel Olam, as a delegate of *kavod Shamayim*. It is parents who bring the world of Torah and mitzvot to life for a child; and it is through his parents that a child first embraces *kavod Shamayim*. *Kibbud av va-eim* is, in this sense, an instrument, a *hekhsher mitzvah* for *kavod Shamayim*.

The dynamics that govern *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh* are therefore inapplicable to *kibbud av va-eim*. For an ordinary conflict between a *lav* and an *aseh* is adjudicated as an external clash between two competing principles,



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Grounded in a partnership with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, *kibbud av va-eim* is vital, axiologically central, and exceedingly potent. It is with this partnership that *kibbud av va-eim* integrates the worlds of *bein adam la-makom* and *bein adam la-chaveiro*, infusing the world of the former into the latter, and it is in this sense that *kibbud av va-eim* serves as the critical transition between the first and last five *dibrot*.

and fully determined by the laws of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh*. A conflict with *kibbud av va-eim*, however, is construed as an internal conflict within *kavod Shamayim* and its distribution, governed not by the laws of *aseh docheh lo ta'aseh* but by an internal calculus of its own.

Grounded in a partnership with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, *kibbud av va-eim* is vital, axiologically central, and exceedingly potent. It is with this partnership that *kibbud av va-eim* integrates the worlds of *bein adam la-makom* and *bein adam la-chaveiro*, infusing the world of the former into the latter, and it is in this sense that *kibbud av va-eim* serves as the critical transition between the first and last five *dibrot*. The Gemara in *Kiddushin* (31a) beautifully captures this partnership:

בשעה שאמר הקב"ה (שמות כ) אנכי ולא יהיה לך, אמרו אומות העולם: לכבוד עצמו הוא דורש, כיון שאמר (שמות כ) כבוד את אביך ואת אמך, חזרו והודו למאמרות הראשונות.

When God commanded the first two commandments, the nations of the world said that He did so for His own honor. Once He said "Honor your father and your mother," they retracted and accepted the first two.

An isolated *Anokhi*, abstract, removed and unapproachable, was hardly intelligible. But partnered with *kibbud av va-eim* — an *Anokhi* reified in the love of a parent, an *Anokhi* immanent in the foundation of family life, an *Anokhi* that radiates throughout a Jewish home — is something else entirely. In harmony with *kavod Hamakom*, how truly, truly resplendent this mitzvah is: *hukash kevodam le-kavod hamakom*.

Notes

1. See the discussion below on whether *kibbud av va-eim* itself is a *mitzvah bein adam la-chaveiro* or *bein adam la-makom*.
2. See the discussion in *Sanhedrin* 56b.
3. See *Tosafot* 6a s.v. *Shekain*.
4. See *Noda Beyehudah Kamah, Choshen Mishpat* 40.
5. See Rambam, *Sefer Hamitzvot, Shores* 1 and Ramban's comments there. See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Mamrim* 1:2. I've elaborated more fully on this issue elsewhere.
6. For lack of a more suitable term, I use "underwritten" free of its financial connotations of "accepting liability" or "guaranteeing," but in its more archaic meaning. The relevant metaphor is that of a surface text underwritten by an interpretive conceptual text.
7. Furthermore, *kibbud av va-eim* constitutes a vital foundation that facilitates the most critical relationship with Hashem. The absolute trust and faith, unlimited reliance,

perception of unlimited power, and intuitive impact that an infant and young child experience in a parental relationship establish a formative model for the Divine relationship of trust, reliance, and infinite appreciation. It is surely no coincidence that we relate to the omnipotent and omniscient Hashem also as *Avinu shebashamayim*, drawing on that paradigm. Absent the parental bond, it would be considerably more difficult, possibly impossible, to cultivate more than an abstract link between limited man and the transcendent Creator. This, too, is an important facet of the *kavod Shamayim* motif of *kibbud av va-eim*. The pivotal role parents play in paving the way for a transference of these feelings and perceptions to *Avinu shebashamayim* is yet a further aspect of this singular *kavod Shamayim* theme. I hope to elaborate these and additional components of *kibbud av va-eim* elsewhere.

8. Compare with the *Tur* and *Shulkhan Aruch's* codification of *Hilkhot Kibbud Av va-Eim* in *Yoreh Deah* 240, between *Hilkhot Sh'vuot*, on the one hand, and *Hilkhot Kavod Rabo ve-Talmid Chakham*, on the other. Note how the Rambam opens the sixth chapter of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, despite not having yet discussed *kibbud av va-eim*.

9. See also the position of the Yerushalmi that *kibbud av va-eim* is greater than *kavod Shamayim*.

10. See however the position of the Rambam (*Mamrim* 6:11).

11. See also the discussion of the *Minchat Chinuch* no. 34.